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A CALL
FOR CHARACTER
EDWARD I. BOSWORTH



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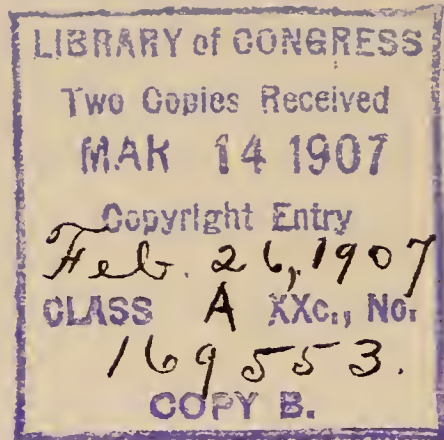
THE PRESENT CRISIS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

A CALL FOR CHARACTER

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OBERLIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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The International Committee
of Young Men's Christian Associations

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THE PRESENT CRISIS IN THE
KINGDOM OF GOD:
A CALL FOR CHARACTER

“Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”—*John the Baptist.*

THESE words were originally a call for character in a great crisis. An earnest man who had met God in the wilderness brought the message to his countrymen. Men, women, and children flocked to the wild gorge of the Jordan river to meet him. They brought with them the scant supply of food necessary for Oriental peoples, slept by night under the open sky and listened by day to the impassioned appeals which the young prophet at intervals delivered from some rocky pulpit. Occasionally large groups of people went eagerly down with the prophet into the deeper channel of the valley where the swift river ran and, praying God to forgive their sins, came up out of the baptismal water with stern resolve or radiant enthusiasm on their

faces. The call which so thrilled these people was both a warning and a promise. It was a warning because they expected the kingdom of God to be preceded by Jehovah's dread day of judgment. It was a promise because their brightest dream of good things to come was expressed by this simple phrase, "the kingdom of heaven," or "the kingdom of God." These men and women had an inadequate understanding of the phrase. It had a far richer, more vital meaning than that which their bright dream of national power and glory contemplated. At this very time there was coming out through the doorway of a Nazareth carpenter shop a Man who caught up the phrase, filled it with a new content, and sent it ringing down through the centuries, a virile cry to the men of every generation: "Repent: for the kingdom of God is at hand." "Change your lives, for God's new order is at hand." It is a call for character in the presence of a crisis.

WHAT IS THE CRISIS?

That is, what is the meaning of this phrase, "the kingdom of God is at hand"? Originally, in the Jordan valley, on the lips of the prophet, it meant that God was about to show Himself and His will for the life of men in the personality of the Messiah. This God did in the personality of Jesus, the Christ. Jesus made a personal revelation of God and a clear statement of God's will for human society, which has ever since increasingly dominated the thinking and endeavor of all generations. He held before men the ideal civilization of brotherly sons of God that should finally prevail in every nation.

In the centuries that have passed since those first days in Palestine it has become evident that Jesus Christ is a living personality, continuing to enforce His revelation of God and God's will for the life of men. A marvelous feature of the character of Jesus Christ was His quiet consciousness that He should not

be without influence in the world of men He so loved, even after He had disappeared from among them. He seemed quietly confident that He should never withdraw in vital power and personal presence until His vision of the civilization of brotherly men should be realized. "I shall leave you," he said, "and the world shall no longer see me; but I will be with you, and you shall be made to feel that I am with you and that I love you." There have never failed to be men and women who in their own experience have found something which corroborates this personal anticipation of Jesus Christ. The power of Jesus which brought such health and cheer to the sick bodies and the sore hearts of the men of Galilee has never ceased to make its presence felt among living men.

"No fable old or mystic lore,
Nor dream of bards and seers,
No dead fact stranded on the shore
Of the oblivious years,

“But warm, sweet, tender, even yet
A present help is He;
And faith has still its Olivet,
And love its Galilee.

“The healing of the seamless dress
Is by our beds of pain;
We touch Him in life’s throng and press,
And we are whole again.”

Jesus Christ not only lives among men and so perpetuates the original crisis and its consequent call for character, but *He is securing a progressive understanding* of God and His will for the life of men. He is making men see more and more clearly what the kingdom of God means. Such progress He Himself anticipated: “Many things I have yet to say unto you but ye cannot bear them now.” Men are being led into a clearer realization of what is involved in the historical revelation of God and His will for the life of men made two thousand years ago and reported to us in the documents that constitute the New Testament.

In this process of enlarging conception it has become increasingly clear that this which at first was called the kingdom of God is a developing civilization of brotherly sons of God in which two things will occur: first, every personality will have opportunity for the development of its latent powers, opportunity to become what God means it to be; and second, all the forces latent in the natural environment of these personalities will be brought out of earth or air and placed by human effort increasingly at the service of men. In this civilization of friendly workmen, living in the presence of the God who is their Father, the long unfulfilling aspiration of Jesus for humanity shall be realized.

In this process by which the Spirit of Jesus makes men understand more and more clearly what is involved in His revelation of God and God's will for the life of men *crises occur*. It is a process with crises. Perhaps there will finally be some great crisis comparable with that

in which the revelation of God was made by Jesus Christ in terms of human life and death and resurrection, human struggle and victory two thousand years ago. However that may be, lesser crises in the process certainly occur when men make swift advance in their understanding of God and of His will for the life of the world.

The present is such a crisis. The crisis is due to the fact that sociological conditions have suddenly brought men of widely different classes into unusually close relation to each other. The world has never before, in so short a time, experienced changes comparable with those that have occurred in the last few decades. Men have been forced into such close contact that the welfare of each is dependent upon the conduct of others to a degree hitherto unknown. Men have been forced together geographically. A man, without rising from his office chair may, in a few moments, through telephone, telegraph, and cable, interchange

thought with a man on the other side of the earth. It is as if he could almost hear his voice and feel his hand. Men are being drawn together industrially. The miner comes up the shaft with his grimy face and looks the coal baron straight in the eye. The two men are brought close together and must talk it out face to face. Men are being brought together socially. Within the lifetime of men still in active business Chicago was a small village and in the village was a small tradesman. The village became a metropolis, the small tradesman became a merchant prince, and his daughter became the wife of the Viceroy of India—all within the limits of a single lifetime. Irresistible forces which no man can control have been steadily bringing men closer together and making the welfare of each dependent upon the behavior of the other, as never before. The result of crowding men so close together may be that they will fall upon each other in deadly hatred or that they will be bound

together with ties of mutual respect and brotherly good will. If they come together only to hate each other, they will fall apart, and civilization will retrograde to a point from which it cannot come again to the present point for some centuries. What the outcome of the present crisis shall be depends upon one thing, namely, the *character of the men concerned in the crisis*. Can Jesus Christ have the kind of men He wants to thrust down into the thick of life? Can He find His type of man in sufficient abundance to bring the present crisis to a successful issue? If so, they will be what He called them of old, "the salt of the earth"—that which preserves civilization from decay and disintegration.

The present crisis, then, constitutes a call for character. The old words ring out with new meaning: "Repent: for the kingdom of God is at hand"; change your lives, for God's new order comes swiftly on.

WHAT KIND OF CHARACTER?

The next question is, What kind of character is called for by the present crisis? What type of man does Jesus Christ need to thrust down into the thick of life, where in dust and heat, in passion and strife, great issues are being wrought out?

He calls for men who will let Him train them for the crisis. They must be men who, consciously or unconsciously, are His disciples and who by the laws of personal association are becoming like Him in the fundamental qualities of His character.

There are two qualities in the character of Jesus Christ which stand preëminent: "truth" and "grace." In John's Gospel they are reported to have been the characteristics that most deeply impressed His associates: "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." "Truth" is conformity between representation and reality—honesty, sincerity.

The Greek word translated "grace" is associated with the idea of beauty and gladness. It is a beautiful kindness that makes its recipient glad.

First of all, then, the call for character is a call for men of *Jesus Christ's thoroughgoing sincerity*. Men who are so close to each other, and consequently so dependent upon each other's behavior for their own welfare, must be able to trust each other's sincerity. Civilization cannot progress, or even persist, if there are not at hand plenty of men who can trust each other, men who do not wish to seem to be more or better than they are honestly trying to become, men of sincere devotion to that which they believe to be right, men who use language, not to obscure, but to express thought.

The call is for students and teachers—for teachers are tempted even more strongly than students—who do not wish to seem in the classroom to know more about the subject than they really do know. A student who will cheat in class

is cultivating the disposition that will lead him to do the same kind of thing in a bank. A dishonest entry in a laboratory notebook cultivates the disposition that leads to a dishonest entry in keeping the books of a bank. The call is for honest men who do not lead a double life—one life at home and in respectable society, another life in places which they secretly visit; men who are the same by night and day. Someone has said: "Character is what you are in the dark." The crisis demands business men who will employ no method in business which they would not be willing to have the public know; workmen who will do the plumbing under the floor as honestly as that which is subject to daily inspection. Honest lawyers are called for, who will stand for the enforcement and not the evasion of law, no matter how much money the law-breaking individual or corporation may offer. Such a lawyer, when he finds that his client is guilty, will do his utmost to secure a fair trial, will

introduce every ameliorating circumstance, and will defend his client to the limit of justice, but will never take satisfaction in a professional success that has involved the defeat of justice. The crisis calls for honest ministers who will express their real convictions concerning truths that seem to them to be fundamental and timely, regardless of the wealth or poverty, the liberalism or conservatism of the people who sit in the pews. There must be ministers who will *think* sincerely, who will not be kept from thinking on certain subjects by the fear of possibly reaching conclusions that it would be costly to express. There must be ministers who will not use conventional religious phraseology that is in excess of their experience. The crisis calls for honest editors who cannot be hired to advocate in print a cause in which they do not believe. The call is everywhere for honest character, for men who will "draw the thing as they see it for the God of things as they are";

for men who "hunger and thirst after" character rather than after reputation; for men who, when in action, are not listening for the click of the camera and the scratch of the reporter's pencil, but who are intent on doing right; for men who feel keenly the deep disgrace of being willing to seem to be something more or better than they are earnestly taking pains to become; for men who realize the repulsive vulgarity of wanting something that another man ought to have.

The call for character is a call for men of *Jesus Christ's invincible good will*. Men cannot live so close together as they are now forced to live unless they are men of invincible good will. They must be men of an invincible good will to God. That is, they must be reverent men, in whom the sense of God becomes ever more profound, more subduing, more uplifting. They must be dominated by an invincible good will to the men on every side, the good men and the bad men, the needy men and the successful men. It

is comparatively easy to feel good will toward the man less successful than one's self, but to feel good will toward the competitor who has fairly achieved a superior success is the triumph of Christian character. It is even more difficult for some than to feel invincible good will for the man who fights them. The old farmer in time of drought said in prayer meeting that there was one blessing for which he was profoundly thankful, namely, that no other community was any better off than their own!

The call is for men of unfailing good will toward men as such, toward men simply because they are *men*. Jesus did not wait until men had become rich, or educated, or skilled before His interest was aroused. The poor, the ignorant, the little children, appealed to Him because they were *human*. Men are called for in the present crisis who will recognize the fact that in every human situation the chief feature is the *men* that are

concerned in it. Let the statement be repeated: in any situation the principal feature is the *men* who are concerned. This means that the manufacturer will recognize as the principal features of his situation the men who work for him, their wives and their children; the men, women, and children who constitute the public that must eat or wear what his factory produces. There can be no adulterated foods, no noxious or worthless patent medicines, no shoddy clothing. There must be workmen who will realize that the chief features of their situation are the men, women, and children whose health, happiness, and morals will be affected by the faithfulness with which the workman does his job. There must be the plumber who will do his work with a good will as conscientious as it would be if he knew that his own brother's family was to occupy the house. The crisis calls for men who do not wish for special privileges, for men who feel restless and discontented when they see other men

with a chance for the best things that is less favorable than their own, no matter whether these other men are in pagan lands, in the neighboring commonwealth, or in the next block. It is the kindling sense of human brotherhood which Jesus calls for in the present crisis and which He is able to inspire. The heart of Jesus Christ may beat so steadily into the heart of His disciple that there shall issue a steady stream of invincible good will pulsing out with the strong head pressure of the beating heart of Christ Himself.

“Let me live in a house by the side of the
road,

Where the race of men go by—

The men that are good and the men that
are bad,

As good and as bad as I.

I would not sit in the scorner's seat,

Or hurl the cynic's ban.

Let me live in a house by the side of the
road

And be a friend to man.”

If men of such character can be found
for the present crisis, then the time
draws on

“When shall all men’s good
Be each man’s rule, and universal peace
Lie like a shaft of light across the land
And like a lane of beams athwart the sea
Through all the circles of the Golden Year.”

The call is for character which possesses something of *Jesus Christ’s profound peace*. Such peace results naturally from sincerity and good will. The man who has ceased from the nervous strain of trying to appear to be what he is not, begins to be at peace; so also the man who has ceased from hate and envy and has begun the life of good will. The call is for men who can go into the rush of modern life with the poise of Jesus Christ; for men who can move among feverish men and yet be cool; for men who in great sorrow and bitter disappointment can stand steady; for men who have come under the spell of eternity; for men whose lives open down into the deep stillness that always underlies the noisy surface of our busy life; for men who

"Hear at times a sentinel
Who moves about from place to place
And whispers to the worlds of space
In the deep night, that all is well."

THE CALL TO COLLEGE MEN

The call to character comes with special force to this college generation. There are men living quietly in college today who ten years from now will be down in the thick of things, as manufacturers, journalists, ministers, teachers, lawyers. They will be able to do something of far-reaching influence in the crisis that is on. What they will do ten years from now may be largely determined by what they are quietly thinking, resolving, doing, now. No man gets ready for an emergency in a minute. What he will do in the emergency depends upon what he did yesterday, is doing today, is going to do tomorrow—upon what he has gradually formed the habit of doing in all the interval between the present and the time when the emer-

gency suddenly confronts him. Responsibilities come quickly upon young men in our day. It has been so in our country since the beginning. We talk about the "Pilgrim Fathers" and think of a group of old men. But they were a group of young, enthusiastic adventurers. Only one of their leaders was in middle life at the time of the Plymouth landing. Miles Standish was under forty. William Bradford, when he began his long career as governor, was about thirty-one. Edward Winslow, the diplomat of the colony in its foreign relations, was under thirty. From that day to this heavy responsibilities have come quickly upon young men. College men must get ready *now*. We must give ourselves over to Jesus Christ's training *now*. Jesus Christ's call for character sounds out in the lecture room, the laboratory, the dormitory, the fraternity house, the gymnasium, the athletic field: "Repent: for the kingdom of God is at hand." Change your life, for God's new order comes on.

Get into the habit of taking orders from Jesus Christ now. Then follow Him wherever He leads you later. It may be into the packing house, into the tenement house, across the seas to other peoples, into the pulpit, into the courtroom or the municipal council chamber. Say to Him, "Lord, I will follow Thee wheresoever Thou goest," and He will lead you far out into life. The Spirit of Jesus is not haunting empty churches six days in the week waiting for them to fill up on the seventh. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is out in the thick of life, and there He will lead you if you will be a man of His type, a man of His thorough sincerity, invincible good will, and deepening peace.

"Lead me; yea, lead me deeper into life,
This suffering human life, wherein Thou
liv'st
And breathe'st still, and hold'st Thy way
divine.
'Tis here, O pitying Christ, where Thee I
seek,
Here where the strife is fiercest; where the
sun

Beats down upon the highway thronged
with *men*,
And in the raging mart. Oh, deeper lead
My soul into the living world of souls
Where Thou dost move.

But lead me, Man divine,
Where'er Thou wilt, only that I may find,
At the long journey's end, Thy image there,
And grow more like to it."

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